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SUBJECT: MALDIVES: MAJLIS PROVISIONALLY CONFIRMS NEW 14-MEMBER CABINET

REF: COLOMBO 1009

1. (U) SUMMARY: On November 12 President Nasheed secured approval for his new 14 minister cabinet. The cabinet represents each of the six parties and groupings that make up the ruling coalition. The cabinet's approval came amidst a power struggle between Nasheed and former President Gayoom's DRP party during which the President removed eight non-elected Majlis members who had been appointed by Gayoom. Those members are now challenging their removal in court. No matter how the court rules in the case we expect the MDP to call new Parliamentary elections quickly. Embassy recommends short congratulatory letters from the Secretary to Foreign Minister Shaheed, and from Secretary Gates and Admiral Keating to Defense Minister Faisal. END SUMMARY.

2. (U) President Nasheed secured the approval of the Majlis (Parliament) for his new cabinet on November 12. A large majority of the 38 members present voted to confirm the 14 ministers as a group. (Note: there were discrepancies in various media reports about the exact vote count.) The cabinet has five MDP ministers, four from the Republican Party coalition (including one from the islamist Adhaalath Party), two ministers from the "New Maldives" group, two aligned to Vice President Waheed's National Unity Party and one for Ibra's Social Liberal Party. The confirmation of the Cabinet was for a 30 day transitional period to allow uninterrupted government operations. President Nasheed will need to re-submit the individual names for parliamentary approval within the 30 day window.

3. (SBU) The confirmation of the new cabinet came amidst a power struggle between the new government and former President Gayoom's DRP. Following the old constitution, President Gayoom had appointed eight non-elected members to the Majlis. Under the new constitution which ushered in multi-party elections, there will be no appointed members of the Majlis to be elected by February 2009. With the defections of the "New Maldives" ministers and Qasim's Republican Party to the opposition alliance, Gayoom's DRP depended on the eight appointees for its 27 to 23 majority in the Majlis. After his election, President Nasheed announced his intention to replace Gayoom's appointees with his own. The DRP opposed this move, citing the constitutional provision which states, "The People's Majlis in existence at the commencement of this Constitution shall continue

until such time as the first elections of the People's Majlis under this Constitution are held." According to several of the Gayoom appointees, each received a call in recent days from a person who identified himself only as "Colonel" informing them that their services would no longer be needed. The former appointees have now filed suit against President Nasheed before the Supreme Court asking to be re-instated.

¶4. (SBU) COMMENT: The language in the Constitution, while not explicitly barring the replacement of Gayoom's appointees, appears to leave ample room for a legal challenge to the dismissal of the appointees. Observers speculate that the recently-established Supreme Court, also appointed by Gayoom, may decide to sustain the challenge. In that case, Nasheed may need to offer some concessions to the DRP in order to get his individual cabinet nominees re-confirmed. Some senior MDP members have told us the government may attempt to move up the date of the Parliamentary elections in order to complete the transition more quickly.

¶5. (SBU) Brief biographies of the most important new ministers follow, organized by their party affiliations:

MALDIVIAN DEMOCRATIC PARTY

Minister of Defense and National Security Ameen Faisal is a West Point graduate and former officer in the Defense Forces. In the 1990s he was a senior member of the National Security Service. He also received mid-career training at Fort Benning. Under President Gayoom, he was detained on political charges on four separate

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occasions, mostly for periods of less than two months. He served a seven-year sentence from 1989-1996, however. Faisal has served as MDP Shadow Minister for Defense since 2006. Observers call him an MDP moderate with broad appeal and good organizational skills. He was elected President of the MDP's key Male' constituency and is in charge of all 48 party branches within Male. In a brief but warm conversation with Ambassador following the inauguration he pledged to continue the Maldives' close military cooperation with the U.S.

Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries Ibrahim Didi is a prominent dentist from an elite Male family and a member of the MDP National council. Observers describe Didi as a key player in the MDP, who was actively involved in the party's fight for democracy. He was arrested during demonstrations in March 2006.

Minister of Finance and Treasury Ali Hashim, a businessman, is a former vice president of the MDP. He was MDP Shadow Minister of Finance and Planning from 2006 to 2007. He has a reputation as a shrewd political tactician and strategist. Hashim was involved in the MDP-Government negotiations facilitated by the British at the UK High Commissioner's residence in Colombo, Westminster House, in ¶2006.

Minister of Housing, Transport and Environment Mohamed Aslam was born September 30, 1970. From 2005 until recently, he was MP for Seenu (Addu) Atoll and a Member of the Special Majlis that drafted and passed the new constitution. Previously he was MDP Shadow Cabinet Minister of Transport, Communication and Technology from 2006 to 2007.

Attorney General Fathimath Dhiyana Saeed is a lawyer. She was formerly a presidential appointee from 2005 and was also an ex officio member of the MDP and Executive Director at the Attorney General's office. Previously she was a State Attorney at the Attorney General's office.

"NEW MALDIVES"

Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmed Shaheed went to school in Male and Colombo. He got a BA in International Politics and Strategic Studies from the University of Wales, Aberystwyth and a PhD in International Relations from the University of Queensland, Brisbane. Shaheed has

spent most of his career at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In 2005 President Gayoom elevated him to Foreign Minister during a major cabinet shakeup. A reformist, he co-founded the "New Maldives" movement within the ruling DRP along with his colleague, then-Attorney General Hassan Saeed. In 2006 Shaheed founded the Open Society Initiative, which aimed to promote human rights, tolerance and democracy. He resigned from his post in August 2007, complaining that a conservative guard within Parliament and the Cabinet was resisting his reform proposals. Embassy maintained close and regular contact with Shaheed since 2005. He expressed his personal thanks to the USG and the Embassy for our support of the democratic reform program. Shaheed favors close relations with the U.S. and made the decision to open their embassy in Washington.

Minister of Civil Aviation and Communication Mohamed Jameel Ahamed (DOB October 13, 1969) graduated from the International Islamic University in Malaysia with a Bachelor of Laws in 1996. In 1998 he received a Masters in Comparative Law from the same university. He specialized in Banking Law. He went on to get a PhD in Criminal Law from SOAS, University of London. Jameel became an MP in July 2005, serving as Minister of Justice in Gayoom's government from July 2005 until August 2007. Jameel was a prominent member of the "New Maldives" group with Ahmed Shaheed and Hassan Saeed in August. In July 2007, Jameel defied conservative Islamists to nominate three women judges to the bench - the first time women were admitted to the judiciary in Maldives. He and Saeed resigned from the government in August 2007, accusing President Gayoom of failing to act against rising Islamic militancy and of blocking reforms. Like

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the other New Maldives Ministers, Jameel appreciated U.S. support for democratic reforms in Maldives and favors close relations with the U.S.

ADHAALATH (JUSTICE) PARTY

Minister of Islamic Affairs Abdul Majeed Bari was previously the Director of the Centre for the Holy Quran and Director of the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs. Dr. Majeed was also a lecturer at the College of Islamic Studies and at the Faculty of Shar'ia and Law. He founded the religiously conservative Adhaalath Party in August 2005.

JUMHOOREE (REPUBLICAN) PARTY

Qasim Ibrahim (born 1950) is one of the most successful businessmen in the Maldives. According to Maldives' folklore, Qasim started out as a servant boy in Gayoom's wife's family. He set up his own business in 1976, trading in commodities such as rice and tobacco. His company, Villa Group, has since become the largest in the Maldives, with interests in tourism and inter-island marine transport, shipping, fishing, and oil, as well as imports and exports. Qasim was a deputy leader of the DRP and Minister of Finance and Treasury until his resignation from the party and the post in July 2008. In August 2008, Qasim joined the Republican Party and subsequently became the party's presidential candidate, securing 15% of the vote in the first round. His control of important ministries and his personal wealth mark him as one of the most important power brokers in the new government.

Minister of Tourism Ahmed Ali Sawad has an academic background in human rights. He studied at India's premier law school at the University of Bangalore and worked as a journalist for the Times of India. He has a PhD in Human Rights Law from the University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand. Ali Sawad is affiliated with the Republican Party and was Qasim Ibrahim's running mate in his recent presidential campaign.

NATIONAL UNITY PARTY

Minister of Education Musthafa Luthfee was the Tourism Minister under President Gayoom. His background is in education, however. He has spent several years working in the Ministry of Education and

reportedly holds a doctorate in education. Luthfee became a confidant of National Alliance presidential candidate Wahaad Hassan Manik. He was subsequently selected as vice-president of the National Alliance Party. In a brief aside with Ambassador after the inauguration, Luthfee expressed hope that his Ministry could expect cooperation on education with the U.S.

SOCIAL LIBERAL PARTY

Minister of Human Resources, Youth and Sports Hassan Latheef worked as a secretary in the Attorney General's Office in the 1990s for two years, and at the Department of External Resources (MFA) for one year. Latheef left Maldives in 1997 to attend Middlesex University in the United Kingdom, receiving a Bachelors in Law in 2000. Latheef then returned to the Maldives where he worked at the Attorney General's Office as a State Attorney. His duties included drafting legal opinions for various ministries. He also represented private litigants before the Civil Court and the High Court. In 2003 he returned to United Kingdom to pursue a Masters in Crime, Law and Society at the University of Manchester. Latheef became Assistant Director of the Maldives Port Authority in March 2005, advising the management on legal issues. His political career began when helped to found the MDP along with Mohamed Nasheed, Ahmed Mausoom and others in 2003. He later left the MDP to join the Social Liberal Party (SLP), which was registered in May 2008. He served as SLP

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Deputy Leader and served as spokesperson for Ibrahim Ismail's presidential campaign.

BLAKE